

Reefing Preferences from the Pros

We surveyed a cadre of experienced delivery skippers from around North America to find out what systems and gear they favor for reefing mainsails, and to find out what they don't like, and why.

When done properly, reefing the mainsail can be a graceful affair, a blend of art and science that keeps strong winds from tearing the sail to pieces while bringing relief to crewmembers who have been bouncing around on deck or in the cabin below. When a reefing line gets fouled or a halyard gets stuck or a block pulls out of the boom and colorful language comingles with the breeze, reefing the mainsail can become a high-seas calamity, and a certain precursor to unsafe situations.

High winds and building seas put a premium on equipment as well as crew expertise. Getting a proper reef tucked in means getting the boat back on its feet, and how effectively each component works alone—and within the reefing system—can mean the difference between an appropriately taut mainsail or a baggy foil with scalloped sags along the luff stressing the slugs or slides and a flogging clew that causes undue wear to both the sail and the reefing gear. All of this not only wreaks havoc on the gear and the boat's performance, but also on its occupants' safety and peace of mind.

To better understand what reefing systems work best, and what particular items of gear function and don't function when the wind pipes up, *Practical Sailors* surveyed a cadre of professional delivery skippers for their insights.

Andrew Burton of Newport, RI, is like several of the skippers we queried. He has sailed all over the world,



Though neither a pro, nor one of the interviewees for this article, PS reader Ron Acierno, above, is an avid sailor who has become proficient in reefing his Nimble 30. By transforming what was once a single-line reefing system into a double-line one (separate forward and aft lines for each reef setting), and integrating blocks for the reefing lines, he says he can now reduce his fully battened mainsail from max hoist to the second of three reefs in under seven seconds—all of that in 30 knots of wind.

logging some 250,000 miles in the last 30 years on boats that have had everything from iron hoops to the latest mast track systems.

"The best way to reef is sailing dead down wind," said Burton. "The boat is stable and less likely to be pitching around in the waves. For mast track hardware, I like the Harken and Antal equipment, they're both fabulous, especially Harken's Bat Car system for getting the main down and being able to reef it. The only area you have to watch out for in the Harken gear is the way the batten

end is attached to the car; there's a pin, sometimes an Allen screw going into a nylon nut that can vibrate loose. It only happened to me once, on a charter boat, and not one that was maintained to private standards. Offshore, if it hits the fan with a bolt-rope system, you'll have a hell of a time getting the sail down; same goes for a roller-furling boom, you have to turn the boat into the wind to get the sail down."

Stan Gauthier of Crew Service International in Vancouver Island, BC,



The mizzen aboard this 82-foot ketch, under delivery by Adam Smith of Echo Yacht Deliveries, has been reefed to balance out the sail plan as the crew makes its way south to Mexico. Smith told us that 'keeping friction and chafe to a minimum' are the most important factors in making a reefing system perform. For that, he prefers roller-bearing blocks, which are hidden in this photo by the reefed portion of the sail

takes the opposite stance regarding in-boom furling systems: "The top dog in my opinion is the Leisure Furl in-boom furler," he told us. "It's made in New Zealand and a really top-notch system.

"For jiffy reefing systems, the cheapest and most effective way to tame the main is The Dutchman. [The Dutchman uses a system of monofilament lines led from the foot of the sail, through bushings, upward to the leech. This keeps the sail in line with and on the boom when it is dropped. See *PS* June 1, 2000.] It's economical and really works. As the main comes down, the sail stays in line. The main problem in reefing on a bigger boat is that the sail piles up and slops over one side of the boom. The Dutchman guides the sail all the way down and keeps it out of the way.

"For blocks, I prefer Harken. By and large, they stand up to punishment, although I have seen some

give way. A lot depends on whether or not the blocks are used on a regular basis. If they're not, they can be troublesome, as can traveler cars, which can stick and generally make life difficult."

"My feeling is that simpler is better," said **Norman Connell** of Bluewater Yacht Delivery, based in the Chesapeake Bay. "A lot of people are under the impression that if you have all the reefing lines led back to the cockpit, you'll never have to go up on deck, but you end up having to go up there anyway, whether it's to put the cringle on or untangle something. I'd rather do it at the mast.

"And a lot of people are afraid to reef the main so they wait too long to do it and that can lead to problems. Often people take a reef in their headsail before reefing their mainsail, and then you end up with too much weather helm.

"As far as single-line systems go, anytime there's a line in the boom running on a block that's inaccessible inside the boom, it's just an accident waiting to happen. I prefer slab reefing with a cheek block on one side of the boom, everything led to the gooseneck, with a winch set on the mast for tightening the clew tension.

"As far as line clutches, I'm of the sort that dislikes most gadgets—they instill a false sense of confidence in what people can do. I prefer single arm cams on the boom for securing reeflines. Isomat makes their booms this way, as do other manufacturers.

I haven't had any problems with The Dutchman system, but I do know some skippers who have had the lines shred; if you don't have full-batten sails with really heavy battens, you don't really need it. Ditto for lazy jack systems—if you have to head into the wind in really rough conditions just to get lazy jacks untangled, it's just not a good trade-off.

"It's been years since I've had any blocks fail on me, but I'm not out stressing the rig, going for that extra tenth of a knot. I sail conservatively and don't try to break things."

"Slab reefing and in-mast furling both have their merits," said **Bob Fritz** of Compass Rose Yacht Delivery in Milwaukee, WI. "I've sailed somewhere near 7,000 miles on an Amel Super Marmu that had in-mast furling, and although I never had a problem with it, I come from a racing background and I found the mainsail shape troubling on that rig.

"The majority of boats I've sailed have had slab reefing, and it works well. There was one boat I delivered with a one-line system, and I didn't like that too much—there was too much friction on the line as it runs through all the required blocks.

"I've used The Dutchman, which worked well to get the sail down and keep it contained. I've also used the StackPack, which I didn't like. It contains the sail when you drop it, but the battens have a tendency to

get caught on the lazy jacks when raised. We were headed to Bermuda and had some pretty big winds and seas. When the wind dropped from 40 knots to 25, we tried to put the main back up, but had to turn into the wind and some big seas to get the sail up, and the battens kept getting caught. It was frustrating at the time, but humorous to look back on.

"I use Harken Air Blocks on my own boat, a Hinckley Pilot 35. As for line clutches, the early Spin Locks were a pain—they were hard to release and chewed up the line, but the modern ones work well.

"When setting up a boat for reefing, I prefer lines led to the mast or boom rather than aft to the cockpit, because you end up having to go up there anyway. Most of my experience with line clutches is with Spin Locks. They're simple and reliable. I haven't had any problems with shackles deforming, but I have had some open by accident if they get hung up on something just right."

"Redundancy is the most important thing to a delivery skipper," said **Jeremy Steele-Perkins** of Ocean Captain's Group, based in Canandaigua, NY. "I've reefed boats of all sizes with jiffy reefing, and used in-mast furlers with some others. With jiffy reefing, if a block pulls out of the boom or some other piece of hardware gives, there's a chance to jury rig it. With in-mast furling, things get more interesting.

"I'm a Harken devotee and have a preference for their blocks and gear. This is a first-class company and has an extremely good training program for their dealers. As far as rope clutches, I prefer these over cleats. With a clutch, should it fail, you can always use a cleat as a back-up, not so with a cleat. And most clutches have evolved over the past 10 years to be very reliable.

"When we get a boat for delivery, we survey it, but a lot of the gear is still an unknown until we put a load on it. Lazy jacks are nice to have, especially on larger, full-batten mainsails like those found on Freedoms,

and this is what I have on my own boat. I've heard good things about The Dutchman, aesthetically it looks nicer than lazy jacks. The Stak-Pak is also very nice, and while this isn't exactly what it was designed for, we once used it as a sail in 50 knots of wind.

"Generally, I prefer lines led aft to the cockpit on a boat. The less you have to go forward, the more elements of danger you're avoiding. We usually sail with a crew of three, so the more that one person can do in the cockpit, the better for the rest of the crew."

"New mainsail handling equipment seems to be a really good idea when the weather's pleasant" notes **Patrick Childress**, who has delivered a lengthy list of boats and co-authored *A Cruising Guide to Narragansett Bay and the South Coast of Massachusetts*. "But as soon as the wind picks up, the more intricate such equipment is, the less likely it works well.

"Intricate mechanical systems like in-mast furling tend to bind at higher wind speeds, especially when you're dealing with a big mainsail that rolls into a mast and must go in perfectly.

"As far as blocks, I go with whatever is there and don't really have a preference for one manufacturer over another. One really good idea is to use a block on a reefing cringle, which eases friction on the metal eye.

"I prefer slab reefing, and used to be an everything-at-the-mast guy, but now with many boats you can reef pretty well from the cockpit. If I do have to go forward, I like to have 'sissy bars' to hang on to.

"As for securing reefing lines, it depends on where the line terminates. If it's led back to the cockpit, I prefer a cleat, like a jam cleat with a breaking device to free the line."

"The installation is everything," noted **Adam Smith**, who occasionally works with Echo Yacht Deliveries of Newport, RI. "Keeping friction and chafe to a minimum is critical in

how well a reefing system is going to work, regardless of whether it's a single- or double-line system. I prefer roller bearing blocks that keep friction low and use Ronstan and Harken the most.

"As far as mainsail handling systems, the Stak-Pak does a nice job of collecting the sail and works well for quick hops, like between islands in the Caribbean. I've found it causes a little chafe on full-batten mains and I like to have extra webbing stitched over batten pockets to protect them.

"Regarding the components of a reefing system, I like sail-taming systems like the Doyle StackPack and The Dutchman, if they're sturdy enough. Part of their appeal relates to how often you have to reef. In windy places like San Francisco Bay where sailors tend to reef pretty regularly, one is more likely to appreciate these systems.

"As far as mainsail reefing layout, I have some mixed feelings. The traditionalist in me says leave the controls at the mast, which is the way it is aboard my own Pearson 35, but being able to reef from the cockpit obviously has its advantages. Principally, it keeps people off the deck in nasty weather, but often you induce more friction in the system by running all the lines back to the cockpit."

Capt. Bernie Weiss of Atlantic Yacht Deliveries in Stamford, CT, told us that he prefers to have deep reefs in the mainsail unless the boat is set up for racing. "I don't believe in shallow reefs. On my own boat—a fractional-rigged Tartan 33—I have two reefs. The first one reduces the mainsail by 15 to 20 percent, and the second takes out roughly the same amount.

"It's a slab reefing system, and all the controls are at the mast. The main halyard is made fast there, so everything is within arm's reach when I get up there to reef. I've got a small, single-speed Lewmar winch mounted on the boom to achieve tension on the clew reefing line. In fact, all the winches on my boat are



The majority of the skippers that PS interviewed said they prefer single-line reefing systems, like the one shown at left. The line ascending up to the reefing cringle near the letters on the mainsail travels back down and terminates on the mast. Double-line systems suffer less friction than their single-line counterparts.

couple of times in good weather before facing any nasty weather. Be certain that the reefing system functions properly and that you know how to get the job done quickly and efficiently. This way you can work out the optimum sequence of maneuvers, which crew is to work at which winch with which lines, and all those other important details. Simple is better than complex. The fewer lines and less tackle—the minimum gear to get the job done—is what I prefer."

Conclusions

In order to ensure that the information derived from this survey would be as representative as possible, the respondents were deliberately chosen using two criteria: the depth of their experience, and their varied geographic locations. Admittedly, the comments compiled don't address every item of gear involved in the mainsail reefing systems that PS readers use, and many of our respondents' remarks are general in nature. Still, it's clear that this group of professionals favors systems that are cleanly laid out, and simple in nature over those that have inherent complexities. Essentially, they favor slab or jiffy reefing systems, and prefer those set up with two lines rather than one.

Surprisingly, most don't feel it's overly important to lead reefing lines and halyards back to the cockpit, a reflection of their leaning toward simplified systems. By general consensus, these sailors aren't big fans of in-spar furling systems, whether in the boom or in the mast. Again, they told us that this is mostly due to the complex nature of these mechanisms relative to slab or jiffy reefing alternatives.

Regarding blocks, three out of the eight respondents prefer products from Harken Yacht Equipment; one mentioned Ronstan, and one Schaefer and Nicro-Fico. There was no clear consensus regarding rope clutches vs. cleats, but Spinlock was mentioned most often as a reliable product. ■

Lewmars, they're just so simple to maintain and reliable. That one is 25 years old and it's never given me a even a minute of trouble. The blocks I use are Schaefer and Nicro-Fico. Both are quality products at reasonable prices.

"I don't use a reefing line for the tack, instead, I've had the cringles in the luff of the sail fitted with earrings—stainless steel rings that are connected through the cringle by webbing—and I simply slip those over the tack horns on the gooseneck. This system is very straightforward and simple. It doesn't take me much longer than a minute or a minute and 15 seconds to tie in a reef. Of course it helps to have someone in the cockpit working the helm, mainsheet, and traveler."

Weiss stressed that there are a lot of variables that should be taken into account before one decides on a reefing system and its components. "You have to know whether the boat is to be raced or cruised, whether the typical crew is experienced or still learning, as well as what prevailing

wind and general weather conditions the boat will be sailing in. Likewise, things like dodgers, which can interfere with someone's ability to fold the main, and mainsail fabric—whether it's heavy and stiff or light and soft—are other important factors.

"Still, there are some general principles that apply to reefing mainsails. Reefing early, before it becomes absolutely necessary, helps. For example, if I'm sailing in the ocean through the night, even with excellent wind and sea conditions, I will typically reef the main before sunset to avoid having to do so in the dark. If sailing a tender boat short-handed, I may put in a reef before I leave the dock so that when I set the main at sea, it is pre-reefed. A forecast of foul weather will also prompt me to reef early.

"The system you know and are comfortable with—whichever one that happens to be—is the best system. When initially encountering a new or unfamiliar reefing system, I would suggest reefing the main a